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PUPIL-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS--MAJOR FACTORS IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE ARTS IN SLOW LEARNERS.

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TEACHERS INCREASE THEIR STUDENTS' DISCOURAGEMENT AND CONFUSION BY IGNORING THEIR PERSONAL GROWTH AND BY NOT RELATING SCHOOL SITUATIONS TO LIFE PROBLEMS. FOR SLOW LEARNERS, THIS MAY LEAD TO FAILURE, FRUSTRATION, AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS. IF THE TEACHER IS TO HELP SLOW LEARNERS, HE MUST BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY THEM, KNOW WHAT THEY EXPECT FROM EDUCATION, AND PERCEIVE WHAT THEY HOPE TO BECOME. ONLY DAY-TO-DAY CONTACT IN ONE-TO-ONE RELATIONSHIPS WILL PERMIT THEIR TRUE ABILITIES TO BE RECOGNIZED. THE TEACHER MUST UNDERSTAND THE ATTITUDES AND PREJUDICES OF EACH PUPIL IN REGARD TO HIMSELF, HIS CLASSMATES, AND THE SCHOOL IN GENERAL. THE FACTOR CONTROLLING THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF THE SLOW LEARNER, HOWEVER, IS THE TEACHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE STUDENT. AS THE TEACHER BECOMES MORE THE HELPER AND THE FRIEND, THE STUDENT BECOMES MORE CONFIDENT AND REVEALS MORE POTENTIAL, THUS INCREASING THE TEACHER'S ENTHUSIASM AND INSIGHT. FOR THE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER, THE BASIC SKILLS OF COMMUNICATION ARE ONLY PART OF HER CONCERN. SHE MUST ALSO IMPART ATTITUDES AND DISPOSITIONS. AS SLOW LEARNERS PREPARE THEMSELVES FOR THEIR PLACES IN ADULT SOCIETY, THE BEST FOUNDATION IS A COURSE IN LANGUAGE ARTS GEARED TO THE NEEDS OF EACH SPECIFIC GROUP AND DEVELOPED IN AN ATMOSPHERE OF TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING. (THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (MM)

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PUPIL-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS -- MAJOR FACTORS IN DEVELOPING LANGUAGE ARTS IN SLOW LEARNERS

Stating the Problem

No one is more aware of our restless, dynamic age, one which confuses bigness and swiftness with breadth and depth, than the present day educator. If Mr. McLuhan is correct in his statement that the media has produced "a 1967 model", a student that operates on an entirely new frequency, then the teacher will have to tune in on this frequency if he is to get his message through. This scientific and space era demands a special know-how in both content and methods if the learning is to be facilitated rather than hampered. Knowledge, however, is not enough. Learning begins in the person and is fostered through the human element in the pupil-teacher relationship. When the student experiences a sense of security, he begins to grow. Today's learner is the product of a technological age, one in which machines turn out products and materials with lightning-like speed. Is it any wonder that the student becomes impatient with the daily school schedule, the long waiting for results, the slow returns in the finished educational product? By not considering the personal element in the development of the student, by not relating school situations to life problems, teachers add to the discouragement and confusion of the pupil.

John Goodlad in one of his addresses concludes that we have "much schooled men, but men devoid of self-understanding and good will toward humanity". In preparing the students for a highly competitive society the school often tends to ignore the development of social responsibility. At present the students seem to

be showing us the way to involvement by demanding that we prepare them through a more personalized education based not on competition but on cooperation.

Again Goodlad pinpoints the problem when he says, "The intellectual man standing disdainfully uncommitted, the educated man standing impeccably uninvolved, these are the symbols of imperfection in education and in schooling." If we are to take seriously these criticisms regarding the educational system, especially as applied to the less gifted child, attention must be focused first and foremost on the student and his personal relationships. It is only on this one to one basis that the teacher will be able to use effectively the materials now so abundant, and to apply successfully the methods which will stimulate the learning process necessary for the development of the total person.

Since the slow learner is the topic of our consideration, we shall begin with him and then move on to the teacher, his attitudes, the interaction between both, the suggested content in the learning process, and the methods which produce the best results.

Before progressing further I would like to clarify with you my understanding of the term "slow learners". The most obvious characteristic of this lowest quartile of the student population, is their inability to keep up. Their maximum mental growth is from eleven to thirteen years and six months, their reading rate from four-fifths to nine-tenths of that of the average student. They are not under-achievers nor remedial pupils necessarily, but rather because of their limited rate and level of development are unable to catch up. Since the schools do not always include programs and qualified teachers for these "problem learners". they frequently become frustrated, fail in their efforts, and join the

ranks of the ever increasing number of drop-outs. There is also a danger of their becoming behavior problems while in school.

Formulation of Attitudes in the Slow Learner

If the slow learner is to succeed, the teacher must first know him, who he is, what he expects from his educational experiences, and what he desires to become. Everyone wants to learn that which has personal meaning and that will enable him to adapt to others and to the changing society in which he lives. The slow learner is no exception. He has a definite place in society, a place which he can fill if understood, encouraged, and properly prepared. How often he is erroneously labeled and channeled into groups with the mentally handicapped on the basis of test scores only. Still educators and psychologists question the validity of these tests which often reflect middle class values and thinking. Testing may reveal some objective knowledge of the student, but it is only in the day-to-day contact with him that his true ability is recognized. A flexible school program permitting transfer from one group to another, based on these personal diagnoses, assures the greatest progress for the individual student.

We know that objective data are basic; teacher appraisals are important, but are not the human qualities of even greater value? Is not how the individual thinks and how he acts of more importance than his accumulation of isolated facts, often the subject matter of testing. Prejudices often create problems and present obstacles to his learning and social development. The environment can become a problem unless the teacher understands the attitudes and prejudices of the pupil in regard to himself, his classmates and the school in general. He becomes

confused and often builds up a feeling of resentment towards the teacher, if his accomplishments are judged by those of average students.

At home he finds himself pressured by unrealistic parents who demand grades he is unable to attain. Such pressures dishearten and in many cases alienate the student from teachers,classmates, the school as well as the parents.

True education, that which is genuinely human, will try to provide an environment in which the slow learner can exercise and develop his evolving mental powers without fear, while retaining his capacity for openness and wonder. We are all conscious of the fact that adolescence is a period when speculative thought emerges and a time when the adult world expects these young man and women to act as adults. The slow learner is subject to the same expectations. He can meet their demands and hopes, but he needs more help as he moves from the world of mystery to the world of rational definition. The task of transition becomes easier and more effective if the teacher is sensitive to the student's openness to reality, and encourages him to preserve his sense of wonder while developing his mental capacities. Capitalizing on the student's natural perception of creation, on his tangible life-experiences, the teacher can lead the slow learner step by step to an unfolding of his rational powers. No longer will his limitations be frustrating, creating paralyzing fear. In his limited powers he will find true satisfaction and security, for he has learned consciously and reflectively to assume as a way of life the fulfillment of his own potential.

Have not the Hippies revealed to us that there is a vast difference between knowledge and behavior? Have they not exhibited the failure of education to develop along with intellectual powers the imagination, feelings and emotions?

By conditioning the learner in an atmosphere of love, trust, and understanding an authentic person develops. In his response to reality in a wholesome environment, he emerges a well-balanced person. To the degree that he has learned to accept himself he begins to share his life with others. As he experiences the joy of being his own true self, he loses the fear of rejection and enjoys his relationships with others.

Development of Teacher Attitudes in Relation to the Slow Learner

The relationship of the teacher to the slow learner is basic to the whole program. This conclusion was reached by a committee of the Indiana Curriculum Center, appointed to study the slow learner. At the early meetings we floundered, exploring every possible facet of the problem, asking ourselves what could be accomplished and by whom. Analyzing the characteristics of the slow learner at various levels, in several types of schools, and in different socio-economic areas, we reached some basic conclusions. It was almost unanimously agreed that the controlling factor determining the academic performance of the slow learner is the teacher's attitude in his acceptance or rejection of the pupil. There is an emotional dimension which requires constant awareness on the part of the teacher. The hopes and fears of the person stimulate or retard learning. Perhaps the teacher might at times resort to more aggressive counseling and shift from the slick professionalism of the pedagogue to that of helper and friend. By understanding and encouraging the student he creates an atmosphere in which a higher performance expectancy can be realized. How often the teacher finds that he has underestimated the true ability of the slow learner. As the student becomes more confident, he becomes more open, and reveals a potential hitherto undiscovered by himself or by others. As the teacher recognizes

the progress of the slow learner brought about by these attitudinal changes, he becmes more and more enthusiastic about working with this group and less likely to assume the attitude of other teachers in the school who fail to appreciate and understand the slow learner.

As we have said earlier, a wholesome, stimulating environment develops initiative and gives the slow learner the courage to reveal his insights by expressing his ideas. The teacher by his positive helpful suggestions elicits not only intellectual responses but also desirable changes in conduct, which result in an enduring and satisfactory behavioral change. By developing attitudes and stimulating interaction within the group, the teacher is able to create a situation in which true learning takes place. Cooperation thrives in this atmosphere as pupils see their own goals and those of their instructors being realized in the day to day school situations. If there is one truth about the present day student it is that he lives in a disturbed world, one that is challenging but confusing. It is necessary,therefore, to help him learn how to adapt to change,to realize that no knowledge is secure in itself, and that it is only in the constant seeking of new knowledge that one gains the right to security. Carl Rogers says that"The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn." If this is a conviction of the teacher, he will constantly focus his attention on ways of facilitating learning-how, why and when the pupil learns- and how the pupil feels when he experiences learning.

As mentioned so often before a condition that is basic to learning is the personal relationship between the teacher and the learner. A true revolution would occur if more of us teachers of the slow learner would make a supreme effort to cultivate this personal relationship and develop positive,constructive attitudes.

To help the slow learner become self-starting or self-initiating is a colossal assignment. By nature he is a follower. That does not mean, however, that he is a "no learner", but rather that he needs more time and encouragement to achieve his goal.

Interaction of the Teacher and the Pupil in the Learning Process

After the slow learner is "at home" in his classroom, having developed a feeling of acceptance and a sense of security through wholesome personal relations with his teachers and classmates, he is ready to follow a formal program in the learning process.

Administrators and teachers, after careful diagnosis, should place the slow learner in a group with others sharing his problems and not with emotionally maladjusted pupils or social deviates. In regard to the program to be followed there is no one curriculum for all slow learners. Different communities and environments dictate the special kind of experiences to be included. For instance, slow learners who come from homes reflecting a higher cultural and socio-economic level require different experiences from those who come from deprived homes. Provision must be made for the kinds of experience that will enable the students to meet the demands of the society or economy in which they now live; to learn how to live effectively in it, and to make whatever improvements or changes that will better him and his environment. The concept of "watering down" the regular program is unacceptable. A curriculum for the slow learner to be meaningful and effective must always reflect the characteristics of the group.

With these basic principles in mind we ask, what type of language arts program will bring the best results? We know that it must be sequential, cumulative and progressive. We know, too, that only teachers who are interested in this type of student

and understand the conditions which influence his learning and behavior should be part of the program.

Since the purpose of the language arts program is to teach the slow learner the art of communication, the course must include the basic skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking and appreciating. It is not a bomb shaking statement to say that reading as a tool, skill and art is the most essential ingredient. Mass media keeps us too well informed to have any doubt as to its basic value. J. L. Spaulding, a modern educator, wrote "To communicate facts is easy, but the educator's business is to create dispositions and this is difficult."

Dialogue with teachers leads me to believe that they are rather hesitant to become involved in the teaching of reading that creates dispositions. Pupils need guidance to discover the values inherent in meaningful reading. Although they attain proficiency in the mechanical and comprehension skills, they do not always find the deep satisfaction that accompanies intellectual and personal growth. The enthusiasm and patience of a creative teacher stirs the imagination and moves the emotions. He fulfills VanDyke's concept of true education "To create men who can see clearly, image vividly, think steadily and will nobly."

Along with the mastery of skills, the slow learner through critical reading related to personal experiences notes his own progress and senses true enjoyment. As he deliberates over situations, he receives insights and acquires new areas of interest.

Interpretative reading is the key to success. Let the student open the door to enjoyment by developing skills channeled through subjects that interest him.

Movies and television provide stimulating experiences and help to interpret the printed word. Current materials for boys with

words relating to automobiles, mechanics, engineering; for girls, recipes, dress patterns and household arts, provide the necessary motivation. If a pupil is at an age to drive a car, he will be eager to read the instructions necessary to pass the driver's license. Any approach is effective that will convince the pupil of the practical value of the skill.

Trips to museums and art galleries interest the individual in the story behind the works of art, including the lives of the artists. This interest leads to further reading for background information.

The newspaper office also provides an exiciting experience. Bulletin boards, cooperatively planned and designed by teacher and pupil, develop creative powers and give the artistic student a feeling of accomplishment. By meaningful experiences, pupils begin to cultivate a thirst for reading without which the skills perform only a minor part of the function which they serve. Since comprehension is based on concepts that are the slow learner's vulnerable spot, he needs a working vocabulary. He must be able to fill out application forms, to read telephone books, city directories, road maps, street guides, menus, recipes, directions, advertisements, newspapers and magazines.

Symbolism in literature is always a problem for the slow learner. Poetry is the best media for developing an understanding of these under-surface meanings. The slow learner has a right to discover these subtleties which give him depth of understanding and a clearer perception of the truth.

In fiction the student will not be bored in solitary literary exile, if he sees the relation of art to life and begins to share with the characters in the novels the essential drives, fears and hopes that are the common possession of all humanity. As he watches the

behavioral changes and traces the growth of ambition, hatred and jealousy that splits society and families apart, he also sees how love, reverence and social concern hold society and families together.

It has been my experience that pupils want more and more class discussion on works of literature. If facts are not the subject matter of the discussion, but rather character analyses in relation to life situations, the students learn personally how to handle mistakes and how to profit by them. When pupils know that the thought period is a time for deeper insights into human nature as well as a time for a better appreciation of the story, they respond spontaneously. Fact-finding and testing might well be de-emphasized.

The teacher can keep the discussion in focus by recalling the following:

1) Is the material related to the instructional level of the group?
2) Is it developing values, tastes?
3) Is it presenting important ideas?
4) Is there movement toward the formulation of definite life principles?
5) Are the students making their own discoveries?

Skillful questioning by the teacher is undoubtedly the most important instructional tool. These discussions become the material for the writing program. As the ideas presented are clarified, writing becomes less a chore. The pupils begin to see the relationship between all phases of the language arts program. Integration is no longer a problem. The reading-inspired writing demands disciplined thinking; the directed discussion develops ideas for the writing.

Instruction and practice in the skills of writing are essential, but they are most demanding of the teacher and less interesting for the pupils. This phase of the language arts program, however, can-

not be neglected nor replaced by lecturing, distributing mimeographed materials, or by plugging in the film or tape recorder. It takes much constant research, ingenuity, and teacher preparation to motivate practice in the skills, to overcome the day dreamer, the mischief maker, and the potential drop-out. Enthusiasm and relevancy with a variety of methods are the key words to success. Administrators can help by scheduling classes of reasonable sizes and by giving the teacher time for pupil diagnosis and for consultation with curriculum consultants.

Evaluation of the Personal Development of the Slow Learner

Evaluation, we know, is an integral part of the instructional process in the language arts program, but how does one evaluate a change of attitudes and behavior in the learner? Objective tests measure mastery of skills, but what about the personal growth? If teachers and pupils together consider the contribution of all their experiences in relation to the goals desired, they will find a better means for measurement. In evaluating, the teacher might ask himself these questions:

1) What is happening to the pupils as individuals?
2) Do the students consider the behavior measured by the tests important in their lives?
3) Are they anxious to take the tests and to study the results in relation to their life goals?
4) To what extent t are the students' criteria of achievement compatible with those of the teachers?

Jerome Bruner in his challenging little book, The Process of Education, reminds us that no one can be by-passed in the educative process. He says, "If all students are helped to the full utilization of their intellectual powers, we will have a better chance of surviving as a democracy in an age of enormous technological and social complexity." The words "all students" in this quotation have special meaning for us. We are here to examine our attitudes

toward this segment of the student population so often neglected, and through an exchange of ideas to find better ways of helping these individuals to build a better self image. Materials and methods arenot the answer, but dedicated teachers, professionally trained and enthusiastically motivated. Such teachers give this national problem the stimulus required to explore ways a nd means ofof meeting better the needs of that eighteen per cent of our student population. The awareness of educators to the problem and their desire to solve it will surely have the support of those parents whose children are having difficulty completing the requirements within the specified time alloted to the average student; of civic groups who are asking for special programs; and of researchers who are concerned by the increasing number of drop-outs.

Vice-president Hubert H. Humphrey in his address at the National Conference of Education in 1966 called upon the delegates to close the gap between the real and the ideal in education by developing an educational system that "will train rather than chain the human mind; that will uplift rather than depress the human spirit; that will illuminate rather than obscure the path of wisdom; that will help every member of society to use his natural talents." This, he said, is an ideal system.

In no other area of education is this challenge more applicable than to us who are trying to build the lives of the slow learners as they prepare themselves for their places in an adult society. The best foundation is a course in language arts geared to the needs of each specific group and developed in an atmosphere of trust and understanding. In these supportive teacher-pupil relationships, the slow learner finds courage and strength.